

Plant Was Vital Cornerstone In Economy for Four Decades

By JOSEPHINE ZIMMERMAN

Utah Valley's entry into the steel-making industry came about through the fortuitous combination of abundant raw materials, men with foresight and optimism, and the right timing for financing.

An account written in 1951 by L.F. Rains who, undoubtedly, could be called the father of the Columbia Steel Company's Ironton plant, relates how he came to Utah in 1910 and invested in coal mining property, which he developed over the next few years.

In 1919 he was contacted by partners in the newly-organized Utah Coal and Coke Co. which had signed a contract on 3120 acres of coal coking lands near Sunnyside in Carbon County. Worried that they might forfeit the payments they had paid (\$50,000 per year), and lose the property, they asked Mr. Rains take over and put the property to work.

Major Hurdle

Mr. Rains realized there was insufficient demand for the coal locally, but there might be a market if it were made into coke. Another major problem was the need to construct 11 miles of railroad to the mining property "through very difficult and mountainous country" at an estimated cost of \$1,500,000. Another \$1,500,000 was estimated to be the cost of building a townsite, securing necessary water rights, and properly equip the mining property.

Despite these disadvantages, Rains took over the task of leading the projects. One of his partners tried for eight or nine months, without success, to raise the necessary financing.

Rains' solution to the problem of developing the coal mines was to turn it into coke and make pig iron. He took an option on the Utah Coal and Coke Company's properties and on iron ore properties, then purchased townsite lands at both locations, secured water rights, and negotiated the many other details involved in building an iron industry from the ground up.

Site Secured

The Ironton site was secured through the efforts of T.F. Pierpont, owner of the Provo Foundry and Machine Co. of Provo, assisted by Ed Hinckley, secretary of the Provo Chamber of Commerce, and the people of Provo and Springville, who organized the holding company which provided land and water rights for the new plant.

The site at Ironton was chosen because it was the point at which the two railroad lines converged. The D&RGW railroad hauled the coal from Carbon County, and the Union Pacific railroad hauled the iron ore from Cedar City. Ironton was the nearest point of assembly of the raw materials to the high population areas and markets on the Pacific Coast.

Turned down by eastern financiers on the project, Rains went to San Francisco, and there interested officials of Columbia Steel Company in the plant, and they agreed to join the venture.

In his memoirs, Rains recalled that he was honored at a luncheon at the Pacific Union Club in 1938, where many of the original directors and large stockholders gathered. Before the luncheon was over, the toastmaster observed that if Mr. Rains had come to them in that year with his proposition, they

would have been

Freight Rates

The new company was incorporated in November, 1922, and construction got underway. Favorable freight rates provided by the railroads made the new plant a profitable producer of pig iron for the foundries and open hearths at Pittsburg, Calif., where steel, rod, wire, nails, and sheet metals were manufactured.

The Ironton plant began making pig iron on May 1, 1924, according to Mr. Rains, who wrote that "Columbia was most fortunate in having all operations managed by men who were deeply interested and determined to make the company a success."

One of those men, Albert E. Terry, well-known Provoan, recalls that he was teaching school and serving as a school principal in Milford when, at his fiancée's urging, he decided to change occupations. He applied for work at the new plant, was hired by W.R. Phibbs, the first superintendent, and helped charge the first oven.

Mr. Terry, who rose to become head of the coke plant at Ironton before transferring to the same position and eventually to the general superintendency of Geneva, said the raw materials, included good quality iron ore, a plentiful supply of coal which was of only "passing quality" as coking coal, and lime rock available locally.

Coking Problem

Mr. Terry helped solve the problem of the poor coking coal, which contained too large a percentage of volatile materials, by drawing off the materials and recovering by-products, some of which were sold and some used locally.

The by-products included gas, light oil, ammonium sulphate, tar, and quantities of benzol, toluol, and solvent. The tar was piped to Republic Creosote Co., now Riely Tar and Chemical Co. nearby, and tank cars of the other products left the plant for markets outside the state.

Mr. Terry says he used some of the chemicals to manufacture paint at the plant for many years. Pea coke was sold for domestic use and to the smelters, and for many years the plant supplied gas to Provo City.

The plant nearly closed during the depression years of 1931 and 1932, Mr. Terry declared, and he recalled that they worked long hours to keep it going.

Long after Geneva was constructed, Ironton was still producing pig iron at a lower cost, until "eventually the antique equipment caught up with us," Mr. Terry says.

Substantial Payroll

When the plant opened, about 300 men were employed, and at the peak of production there were 450 employees. The earliest production was around 350 tons per day, but careful management and the dedication of the close-knit team of men who operated it brought the production up to 550 tons, and finally to a high of 674 tons in 1949.

During World War II the Defense Plant Corp. shipped a blast furnace from Joliet, Ill. to Utah to help increase the pig iron available to the West. This furnace was assembled at Ironton and was put into operation in June, 1943, but it

was not

Kaiser Role

In December, 1947, the Kaiser-Frazer Parts Division of the Kaiser-Frazer Corp. purchased the blast furnace from the government, along with 500 beehive coke ovens in Sunnyside. Pig iron was produced for approximately one year, when a shortage of Western markets forced another closure.

In 1952 the entire plant became part of the Columbia-Geneva Division of U.S. Steel.

After closure of the Ironton operation, the plant lay idle for a number of years, although the raw materials division of Geneva used part of the office and warehouse space.

Dismantling Project

About four years ago the property was deeded to Brigham Young University, and the university let bids for its dismantling. After the removal of the steel-making facilities, the LDS Church did extensive studies concerning possible establishment of an industrial park on the site, but later announced the cost would be unfeasible. Its prospects for industrial development are still being studied with a view to developing it on a smaller scale.

Permanent discontinuation of the plant was announced by U.S. Steel on May 31, 1966, although it had been inactive after closure of the No. 1 blast furnace in Feb. 1962.

The importance of Ironton in the development of Utah's iron and steel industry cannot be over-emphasized. It served as a pilot plant for World War II expansion in the use of Utah's borderline coking coals. Experience gained at Ironton was of incalculable worth to those who built and managed the Geneva Works of U.S. Steel.

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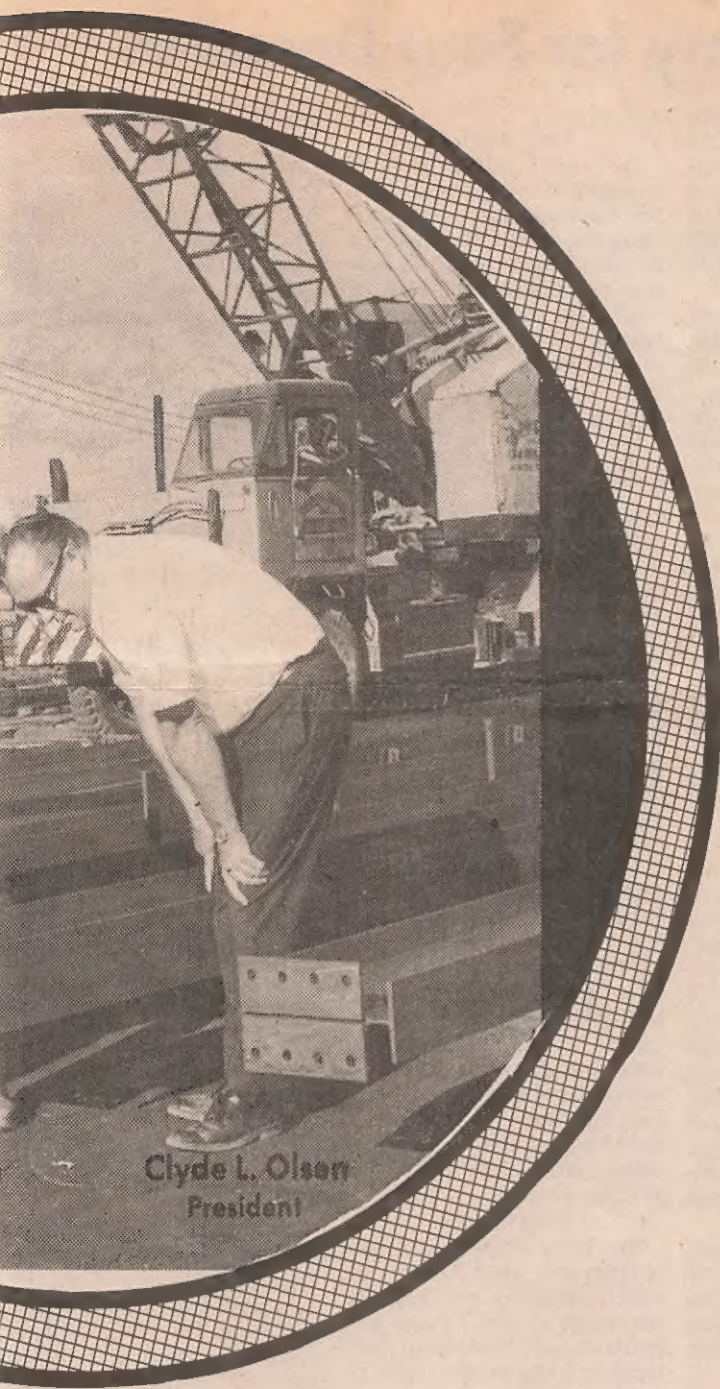
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